WORKING PAPER

Working Paper No. 6

Urban Strategies in Rural Develo

The Space And The Dynamics of Ch

District

by

Jean Racine
French National Centr
for Scientific Resear

MADRAS INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
79, SECOND MAIN ROAD, GANDHI NAGAR, ADYAR
MADRAS 600 020

Working Paper No. 62

Urban Strategies in Rural Development: The State The Space And The Dynamics of Change in a Tamil District

by

Jean Racine
French National Centre
for Scientific Research

MADRAS INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

79, Second Main Road, Gandhinagar,

Adyar, MADRAS 600 020

November 1985

URBAN STRATEGIES IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT : THE STATE, THE SPACE AND THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE IN A TAMIL DISTRICT

The concept of urban strategies usually pertains to the subject of urban development: how policy makers, planners, official bodies and urban dwellers react to the challenge resulting from uncontrolled urban growth, particularly in sprawling metropolises. We believe however that a second type of urban strategy does exist: a type which encompasses the strategies elaborated in towns and cities and which is directed, not towards the urban sphere itself, but towards the countryside. If the legitimacy of state and government is founded upon the votes cast by the entire population exercising its franchise - and this population is predominantly rural - the seat of power is predominantly urban. It is in cities that decisions are taken on policies affecting the fate of villagers and it is mainly in local towns that the policy implementation machinery is at work. It is in these towns that the state[1/] has traditionally established its antennae towards controlling the countryside in the domains of law, order and revenue and it is in these towns, as well, that economic and market forces have established the bases from which exchanges with the rural sector are conducted, or at least supervised.

In this context we propose to analyse here the means by which the state machinery, which is urban at the decision making level, conceives the implementation machinery of rural development policies in the countryside. This paper will thus be an attempt at some understanding of the nexus between urban-rural relationships on the one hand and state policies for rural development on the other.

1/ According to convention, 'state' with a small s, refers here to the state power, whatever its scale of application (from the national to the local level) may be, whilst 'State' with a capital S refers to the State of Tamil Nadu.

The full range of urban-rural relationships will not come under systematic scrutiny here, though it must be emphasised that only a comprehensive view of the problem would be capable of doing justice to the complexity of the facts. However incomplete the following attempt may be, it is believed that its focus is not irrelevant to a better understanding of the dynamics of change in Tamil Nadu. A set of related questions may best express this focus: how, explicitly and implicitly do rural development policies conceive of urban-rural relationships? What network has the post-independence state established for controlling its territory, as far as development policies are concerned or, in other words, how does the state development machinery penetrate the rural sphere from its urban centres of power? When urban controlled bureaucracy and urban functions go rural, how can rural feedback reach the towns from the villages?

The limits determining the scope of this paper have purposely excluded a thorough analysis of the effective results of rural development policies. However, since spatial dynamics are nothing other than a particular expression of social dynamics, we shall try to assess the significant social change expressed by spatial strategies and, in so doing, will come to question the extent of the validity of the 'urban-rural divide' concept.

The field study upon which this paper is based was carried out in early 1985 in South Arcot, a coastal district of Northern Tamil Nadu.

I. Rural Development and the ideology of urban-rural relationships

Prior to Rajiv Gandhi's recent decision to link Rural Development and Agriculture again at Central Government level in a single ministry, Rural Development, as such, was under the responsibility of a fully fledged ministry. At the outset,

a brief analysis of this Ministry's latest annual report (1983-84) may provide an important clue as to how the makers of policy at the highest level integrate rural development into the vital framework of urban-rural relationships.

A. Urban sphere, rural sphere: a great divide? Disagregated perspectives in general

A clear answer to the above question can be found by going through the Annual Report (1983-84) of the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India[1/]: at the highest level, rural development policy makers simply don't take urban-rural relationships into account. The 155 page report finds room for comment upon the progressive increase in the use of Hindi in the Ministry, the reconstitution of Hindi Salahkar Samiti and the new Gramin Vikas Sahitya Puraskar scheme (total : 11 pages) but makes no specific statement on the positive or negative roles towns may play when interacting with their rural hinterland. An incidental remark to the effect that, "all towns with a population of one lakh as above ..." might possibly become" eligible for central assistance for terminal markets for fruit and vegetables" (page 63) certainly does not substitute for a theory of (or programme on) the influence of towns on rural development.

Whilst it is true that theories of development might not normally be set out in ministerial annual reports, such theories might nevertheless be expected from the Planning Commission. 'The Mid-Term Appraisal' of the Sixth Five Year Plan[2/] does not bring much solace in this regard. It refers implicitly to urban rural relationships in paragraphs dealing

---

1/ Ministry of Rural Development: Annual Report 1983-84 Government of India, New Delhi, 1984, 155 p (Hindi) and 155 P (English) + two fold outs.

2/ Planning Commission: Sixth Five Year Plan 1980-85. Mid-Term Appraisal. Government of India, New Delhi, 1983.

with agricultural marketing, agricultural credit (p 35), "flow of bank finance" to the Village and Small Industries Sector (p 56). The priority given to the Urban Development programme is, however, explicitly referred to, as follows: "The thrust of the urbanisation policy during the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85) is to give greater emphasis to the provision of adequate infrastructural and other facilities in the small medium and intermediate towns. The aim would be to strengthen these markets centres to equip them to serve as growth and service centres for the rural hinterland". (my emphasis). These statements, whether implicit or explicit, and which are inserted into a very densely printed report running to nearly a hundred and forty pages, cannot be considered as anything more than passing remarks.

No matter what may percolate from the Planning Commission theories of space and development to the Ministry of Rural Development, the fact remains that even a central body involved in research and training, as for example the National Institute of Rural Development, pays scant attention to urban-rural relationships, although, as stated in the Ministry report, "the focus of its Research Studies was on problems of implementation (my emphasis) of rural development programmes" (p 78): on the list of 57 training sessions, courses, seminars and workshops, announced by the NIRP for 1983-84 not a single one was on urban-rural relationships and nor were any of the 17 research studies conducted by the Institute between December 1982 and December 1983.[1/] It is true that there have been a few topics which have opened up vistas on this subject (such as "Role of Bankers in Rural Development", "Cluster Planning" or "Structure created for Rural Marketing System)" but urban-rural relationships themselves never come under scrutiny in the nation's leading research institute which is under the control of the Ministry of Rural Development.

1/ Ministry of Rural Development : Annual Report 1983-84, op.cit see p 78-85.

This is a significant lapse and one which testifies to the fact that, for the most part, policy makers continue to have a disaggregated view of the space they are supposed to be developing. In the real world the urban-rural disparities are great and the urban-rural divide is still greater to many minds. Clear cut categories are most convenient from the point of view of the state machinery implementing development policies; the departmental approach, which is the rule in bureaucratic practice, strongly supports thematic perspectives and tends to discourage any attempt to come to grips, not just with topics, but also with the <u>relations</u> between topics. Even planners elaborating plans at the district level chose or endorse a thematic approach to projects, angled towards the administrative order: an example, amongst others, is the district plan for South Arcot made twelve years ago. The District Planning Cell, composed of three officers and headed by the Collector, was at pains to define subregions, all of which had already established administrative limits, for the sake of easier data collection. Projects, in each subregion, were defined in such a way as to fit into the already established administrative set-up: agriculture, animal husbandry, forestry, water supply, health, housing etc. each project obviously coming under the umbrella of a specific government department. Since no department had urban-rural relationships on its agenda, no particular attention was paid to that question.1/ This disaggregated approach is very much in the ascendancy over a geographical perspective which would attempt at a more intricate and a more adequate understanding of spatial dynamics. It would, of course, be naive to infer ignorance, on the part of administrative and extension officers, of the constant interaction going on between the rural and urban worlds. These links, of which they must be aware professionally, the interaction they are themselves practising in their daily lives, are not the objects of an

---

1/ State Planning Commission: <u>Towards an Affluent District Economy. A Perspective Plan for South Arcot.</u> Madras 1973 Plan documents NO.20 and 21, pp 193 and 227.

explicit conceptualisation, simply because these relationships have not been defined as a matter of enquiry, nor as a programme of action; those, in other words, who know more than anyone else in the field of urban-rural relationships, have such a disaggregated and categorised view of them that they have no definite answer to give to an interviewer asking them how they perceive those relations in the block development where they work.

An exception may possibly be the Town and Country Planning Department which, along the Ministry of Works and Housing's guidelines, works out master plans for control of land use in urban settlements, and in the rural areas promised to urbanisation around towns and cities, which also takes into account those rural settlements which could be identified as future growth centres. Town and country planning as a whole, however, is such more focussed upon towns and towns-to-be than on urban-rural relationships as such. The Town and Country Planning Department, moreover, operates only at the State level and has no permanent cells in the districts themselves.

It may thus be seen that, whenever government departments and semi-government bodies involve themselves in the identification of growth centres, which are bound to play a key role in the field of urban-rural relationships, the very Ministry in charge of rural development is, somehow, left quite unconcerned. The same thing can be said when it comes to most academic research: geographers, economists, anthropologists, demographers and other social scientists besides, have written extensively on urban-rural relationships and their work may be consulted by the State Planning Board. Neither their findings nor their interviews have come to be common knowledge amongst those who, in the field, are responsible for controlling, altering and improving those very relationships. This is not to say that State representatives have no implicit or overt perceptions of the urban-rural dichotomy and relations, nor

that state and government are taking no practical action in this regard but simply that these perceptions are, most often, individual and are not an administrative credo which could serve as a base for action; in that field practical action usually reveals unformulated policies. Our task now is the identification of these perceptions and the analysis of the policies.

B. <u>Four concepts of urban-rural relationships</u>

Amongst the wide range of theories on urban relationships in India, four main trends can be distinguished, four conceptual approaches which are sometimes divergent, or even antogonistic and sometimes not. Any one of them, when adhered to by an officer of the state machinery, has necessarily, implications for the design and/or implementation of rural development. In most cases, as has already been said, this adhesion is not a matter of theory, yet the general feelings of the government servants who work in the Rural Development Department can easily find a place for themselves in this four sided conceptual frame and especially in two of its components. We shall therefore begin with these two predominant concepts.

<u>The village as a place apart.</u>

One of these four principal concepts of urban-rural relationships derives, to some extent from Munro's view of the Indian countryside. Munro depicted the Indian village, of pre- or early-colonial days, as 'something of a little republic', a kind of geographical entity in itself, that is: a place apart. It was supposed that rural communities dwelt in some isolation, affected only by raids by armies on the move and by the visits of the tax collectors. However unhistorical such a conception may have been it has still left its traces on the minds of many people who still think of the urban and rural worlds of today as separate entities.

Except in a few special cases, where areas were isolated from the mainstream of Indian evolution, as some of the most remote hill tribes may have been (up until the last decade, the Kalrayan Hills of South Arcot were just such a tract apart), this view is not sustained by any geographical analysis; economic exchanges as well as a whole range of relations not purely economic (migration, pilgrimage etc.) have always linked villages to neighbouring, and sometimes remote, towns, quite intensively.

The point here is not to agree or disagree with such a concept but rather to mark the liveliness of the ideology derived from this mistaken assumption. However small their own town may be, all urban dwellers who think of villages and villagers as backward places and ignorant fellows are the direct heirs of this cliche, no matter what the personal philosophy of Munro may have been. In taluk towns and small towns the government offices are coming to be staffed with such members of the lower middle class; it is only too easy to imagine how their misconceptions about village life and their scorn for rural folk culture obstructs the imaginative implementation of rural development programmes.

<u>The town as a centre for change</u>

The second theory of urban-rural relationships complements the first one in several ways but can also stand on its own, since contempt for villagers is not a prerequisite for its acceptance. This theory sees cities, and to a lesser degree, towns as centres of change: places of innovative ideas, of concentration of finance, places of many facetted powers and places of initiatives. For instance, towns set up or stimulated by colonial powers in the region under consideration here, were genuine centres of change: Pondichery and Cuddalore (with today 250,000 and 127,000

inhabitants respectively) as ports and administrative centres; Villupuram and Tindivanam as market places, growing faster than any of the other ancient towns in the district because of their location on the Great Trunk Road and the Southern Railway tracks; to say nothing of the Madras metropolis whose influence encompasses the whole of Tamil Nadu and beyond.

It should be noted however that, in a district such as South Arcot, where most of whose urban settlements are modest, a town is not always, per se, an active centre for change. Whilst Pondicherry, Cuddalore and Chidambaram governed over an immediate hinterland of fertile alluvial plains, only the first two acted for long as real agents of intense economic change in the surrounding countryside: the first was the pioneer place for pumpset irrigation in South India, the second the generative node for market-oriented sugarcane cultivation, thanks to the big sugar mill at Nellikkuppam (1981 population: 40,000) set up by the Parry's Company, solidly established in Cuddalore. That nothing similar happened for decades around Chidambaram (only 62500 inhabitants in 1981, despite its glorious past and the modern Annamalai University) can be ascribed to socio-economic factors rather than to geographical ones as such. The required class of innovative, small or large enterpreneurs simply was not there, nor the sort of sizeable administrative machinery which sustained the growth of Pondicherry, Union Territory Headquarters, and of Cuddalore, District Headquarters, nor a significant Central Government undertaking such as the Railways at Villupuram or, more significantly, the Lignite Corporation at Neyveli which transformed a quasi-vacant site into a township of one lakh inhabitants in less than thirty years, which process, inevitably, had many consequences for the surrounding villages located on the dry and poor ferralitic red plateau.

Aside from their purely economic role and their traditional administrative power, all urban settlements were, anyway, intended to be centres for change, after Independence when the new policy of development from the top was launched with the overall experiment in Community Development. The urban hierarchy, from New Delhi to block headquarters - via Madras, Cuddalore and the taluk headquarters was, to a large extent, the backbone of the power hierarchy embodied in the new development administrative machinery.

At the implementation level, almost all the officials involved in rural development consider the town as a centre of change and, for most of those officials with an urban family background (a fair amount of them coming from villages even so), this relationship is a powerful expression of a hierarchy of values. Although, at high level seminars, IAS officers and academics stress the need to educate the rural population in, for instance, matters relating to the preservation of the ecological balance towards the promotion of better development,[1] block level officers have a cruder, if not a fundamentally different, view of what forward (urban) places offer to backward (rural) people. To draw a quotation from the field: "the more contact they come with the town, the better civilized the villager will become"(sic).[2]

---

1. This perspective was very prevalent during the three day seminar on the 'Kaveri Basin Ecodevelopment' organized in January 1985 by the Madras Science Foundation, little attention was given to the peasant and tribal rationales vis a vis environment.

2. An officer of Kallakurichi block development dixit, interview, March 1985:
   I leave to authorized linguists the care of commenting upon the Tamil inheritance one may decipher in the English rendering: after all, if I am not mistaken, there is a single word in Tamil for "inhabitants of a capital" and civilized persons" (nakara-p-pati-valnar, in the Tamil lexicon transcription), and the word 'civilization' (nakarikam) refers also to "the manners pertaining to a city".

The village as the key to development: the Gandhian idealization of rurality.

Opposing the urban conceit is the Gandhian concept of the village with its idealization of the rural as the key to India's future. The Gandhian view is too well known for any examination of it to be necessary here. It is certainly true that no real development can occur without the villages being directly involved but it is as clear now-a-days that such an involvement cannot be effective in isolation: Gandhian experiments may work here and there in some dedicated communities but successive Indian governments, no matter what they may have said in their speeches, have rejected the blueprint proposed by the Mahatma as a model for development. Gandhi may have been largely in the right when he depicted the evils that go along with towns and cities but towns and cities are here to stay, and to grow. Just as it is unrealistic on the part of urban policy makers to regard villages as places apart, so it would be equally unrealistic to see the villages alone as having the keys to their own development, if for no other reason than because the market forces are mustered in towns and cities. There is no need to justify the statement that Gandhian visions are a lost dream for those in charge of rural development: the process of policy making and planning, the structure of power, the economic framework, party politics and the promotion of urban values have seen to it, to say nothing of pervasive corruption.

Though the Gandhian view of the villages may have been idealistic, it rightly emphasized two essential points: that the motor power for development cannot be found in cities alone and that, in a genuine development process, economic activities and social evolution cannot be separated.

The urban bias

The last theory we shall make mention of here accepts the concept of the town as centre of change, without reservation, and goes still further, asserting that such change is

not necessarily positive for the villages and that it is extremely unbalanced. This concept was best expressed by Michael Liption, when he exposed the 'urban bias' as the cause of the 'slow and unfair' development afflicting India, amongst many other countries: a bias, both from the efficiency norm and the equity norm, a bias which encourages an unfair allocation of resources to the detriment of the countryside, a 'dispositional urban bias', due to the state of mind of policy makers, products of their own urban backgrounds and affinities which cause them to identify modernity with the urban sector alone and to promote development policies which are in fact, "from, by and for people in cities".[1]

These ideas are not usually shared by the field officers concerned with rural development who tend to believe that the schemes conceived in New Delhi and Madras are correctly formulated. Moreover their disaggregated view of the development process causes them to leave the urban question aside as being irrelevant to their duty. Things are naturally different at the decision making, levels of the state power: when planning and budgetting the government has to opt strictly for priorities and to determine what share of the anticipated outlay will go to the cities and to urban dwellers and what to villagers and which group will receive the biggest per capita share. An analysis of these financial choices and the study of their spatial distribution would build up a financial geography which would throw much light upon some key elements in urban-rural relationships; there is a promising field of research here which is not however touched upon in the present paper.

----

1. Michael Liption "Why Poor People Stay Poor" A Study of Urban Bias in World Development" Heritage Publishers, New Delhi, 1980. See particularly chapters 2,3 and 4 p 44-141.

Having evoked the idelogical background of urban-rural relationships we shall now consider the ways in which the state conveys its rural development policies from cities to villages and how it obtains feedback from the rural areas. We shall not deal here with the social aims of the development policies nor with the results as such, but only with the spatial instruments upon which their implementation relies. However , an analysis of the spatial network of the powers involved will naturally offer significant information on these points. We shall attempt just such an analysis here, with South Arcot District as a case study.

II. Rural development, urbanization and rural grid-making: the spatial network of the state development machinery

Many are the discussions on the contents and results of the various development programmes[1]; many too are the studies on the development bureaucracy[2]. In a perspective distinct from these two important fields of enquiry, we would like to analyse here another parameter of the implementation process of rural development policies. According to its official formulation, the major thrust of those policies is "on strengthening the socio-economic infrastructure of development in rural areas and alleviation of rural poverty"[3]. To be

---

1. The most recent one has been launched by Nilakantha Rath: "Garibi Hatao' - Can IRDP Do it? Economic and Political Weekly, Bombay, February 9, 1985 p.238-246, and is going on thanks to the two following rejoinders: ML Dantwala: "Garibi Hatao':Strategy Options" EPW March 16,1985,p.475-476, and Indira Hirway" 'Garibi Hatao': Can IRDP Do it?", EPW March 30, 1985,p.561-564.
2. For instance: Kuldeep Mathur "Bureaucracy and the New Agricultural Strategy. New Delhi, Concept, 1982, and V.A. Pai Panandiker, R.N.Bishnoi, O.P.Sharma: Development Bureaucracy, New Delhi, Oxford & IBH,1983.
3. Ministry of Rural Development: Annual Report 1983-84, op.cit p.1.

successful, this twin process - physical and social-demands, amongst other requirements, that the creation and the strengthening of socio-economic infrastructures and amenities spread effectively over the countryside. Even though it is most often loosely formulated, there is a vital spatial application to be found in it. We'll try to investigate these spatial patterns, as observed in South Arcot District. Due to its size 10895 km and to its 1981 population, 4201000 inhabitants, South Arcot is a fairly representative, example of an average district.[1] Without any big city, it is less urbanized than the State as a whole, with only 15.1% of its population settled in Census towns. The State figure is twice as large. A part from the efficient Neyveli Lignite Corporation, which built up a township which today ranks second to Cuddalore, the district headquarters, South Arcot is poorly industrialized: in 1979-80, it ranked 10th amongst the 16 Tamil districts for small scale industrial registered units, and 12th for factories. This modest urbanization affects the literacy rate, 40.9% noticeably lower than the State average. Another factor, socio-economic deprivation, may also explain this low rate: South Arcot along with Chingleput is one of the two Tamil districts where the Scheduled Castes account for more than 25% of the total population, a very high figure by all-India standards.

The district can hardly be labelled as backward however; with agriculture as the main activity, South Arcot figures equalled the State averages in 1980-81 as far as paddy, groundnut and sugarcane, its three leading crops, were concerned. Similarly, the area sown more than once (19.9% of the net area sown) was identical with the state figure (20.3%). Amongst its four main geographical divisions only one is

---

1. But the "average district" features are fast evolving as the partition of old districts into two or three gains momentum.

really backward, the tribal Kalrayan Hills, which were left in isolation up to the late seventies. Not far from the sea, the red sandstone plateaux with their dry lands and ferralitic soils are more poor than backward. The backbone of the district, the large pediment area running along the foot of the Eastern Ghats does encompass poor tracks, but is fertile enough due to the dense network of tanks established by villages centuries old. The remaining type, the alluvial plains of the Lower Varahanadi, Ponnaiyar, Gadilam rivers, and the northern fringe of the Kaveri delta, are prominent examples of the fertile paddy lands in which the classic Tamil civilization blossomed, around high towered and prestigious temples such as Chidambaram Sri Nataraja Koyil.

Hence, on the whole, South Arcot appears to be a significant field of enquiry for assessing urban-rural relationships in an under urbanized but non-backward district.

A. Urban grid and urban-conceived rural grid.

The power of the government and its practical implementing instrument embodied in the administrative machinery, control, from the State capital and from District Headquarters, the territory they are in charge of, through a network of roads, railways and towns, which are also axes and places of trade. The sophistication of this network is one of the basic requirements for an efficient administration and a dynamic market oriented economy.

During the Raj the state therefore had "two main activities" to perform as analysed by C.J.Baker: "Firstly it had to collect enough revenue to maintain the army and the administration (....). Secondly it had to do the minimum necessary, in terms of state expenditure, to oil the wheels of overseas trade."[1] Such a policy required a two sided network.

1.C.J.Baker. An Indian Rural Economy,1880-1955. The Tamilnadu countryside. New Delhi, Oxford University Press,1984. See p.422.

On the one hand, economic exchanges and transportation needs required a network instrumental for linear movements: roads and railways leading to the ports, were its main components. Towns were the main nodes from where impulses were given. On the other hand, for the sake of revenue collection and social control, the network had to cover the entire area under administration. Its pattern was not only linear: it had to authorize as well the efficient collection of revenue from all settlements. Hence, the Revenue Department developed the most articulate grid linking the district headquarters and its collectorate to the entire rural area, through a four tier system of spatial units: divisions, taluks, firkas, revenue villages.

After Independence the first activity had to continue since the collection of revenue is essential for any state. The second one was greatly altered, as state expenditure for economic growth increased dramatically, with national production trade now having the highest priority. A new basic activity was added for promoting not only economic production but also (at least in official statements) development i.e. the overall diffusion of better facilities, amenities and resources to the largest possible number of people, in the fields of education, health, nutrition, employment, communication, etc. in a much publicized anti-poverty drive.

When the Community Development policy was launched in the fifties, and extended to the whole of rural India in the sixties, the Government had to decide which grid it was going to adopt to cover the territory under its jurisdiction. Once again, but this time with regard to rural development and not for revenue purposes the problem was to set up an efficient spatial instrument, able to convey from cities to village a policy which was intended to leave no area untouched. But if the aim was rural, the conception and the implementation process were urban-generated and urban-controlled.

We are thus faced with two types of networks (closely related to one another in fact but functionally distinct and complementary): the network and the hierarchy of towns can be called the urban grid, while the way the urban centres of decision organize the area coverage in terms of rural development could be called the urban-processed or the urban-conceived rural grid: the formula does not imply that the grid relies upon towns alone for its coverage of the rural areas. It simply stresses the fact that the power to establish the rural grid lies in cities, that, in other words, not only the strategy of rural development, but its tactics as well are vested in urban authorities.

This distinction being made, a brief comment on the urban grid is a prerequisite for the analysis of the rural development network designed by the cities and towns in control.

B. The urban grid in South Arcot: what is a town in Tamilnad?

Without elaborating too much on a point which was discussed in detail in another forum a few years ago[1], we feel it necessary to underline here the haziness of the concept of town as accepted by scientist relying upon the Census of India statistical data. The Census criteria are well known: are urban areas "all places with a municipality, corporation, cantonment board or notified town area committee", and all other places with" i) a minimum population of 5000; ii) at least 75% of the male working population engaged in non-agricultural pursuite; and iii) a density of population of at least 400 persons per sq.km"[2]

---

1. See J.Racine: "Small market towns and small towns in South India: a critical use of the Census data in the field of urban geography. A case study of the Tamil district of South Arcot and of the Pondicherry Territory". Mimeographed paper presented at the Indo-French Bi-National Seminar on Problems of Urban growth. Centre for the study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Dec.1978.

2. Census of India 1981, Series 1, India, Paper 2 of 1981, Provisional Population Totals, Rural-Urban Distribution, New Delhi, 1981, See p.23.

On this basis researchers frequently conduct studies on urban dynamics, and built-up urban networks modelled on central place theories. However, Census data does not give a totally accurate image of the background of urban-rural relationships, for a major flaw prevents the Census typology from giving the required clue in that field. "All areas which are not urban".[1] Such an assertion however logical it might seem, is in fact misleading, because all settlements which are not towns are not necessarily villages. Between full fledged Census towns and villages is a series of settlements which perform vital functions and are, in most cases, obligatory relays in the urban-rural relationships. Those modest market places that we have suggested to label more specifically "boroughs", are classified as villages by the Census. In fact, even if their lay out is still predominantly rural, they perform some of the functions traditionally imputed to towns: besides a bazaar, they usually offer at least three of the following services; administration, banking, secondary education, health and welfare amenities, and as a result, more than half the working population is employed in the tertiary sector mainly for the benefit of the surrounding villages. As data on employment is not yet available at village level for the 1981 Census, it is not possible to update the identification of such centres here, as we previously attempted to do on the basis of the 1961 and 1971 censuses.

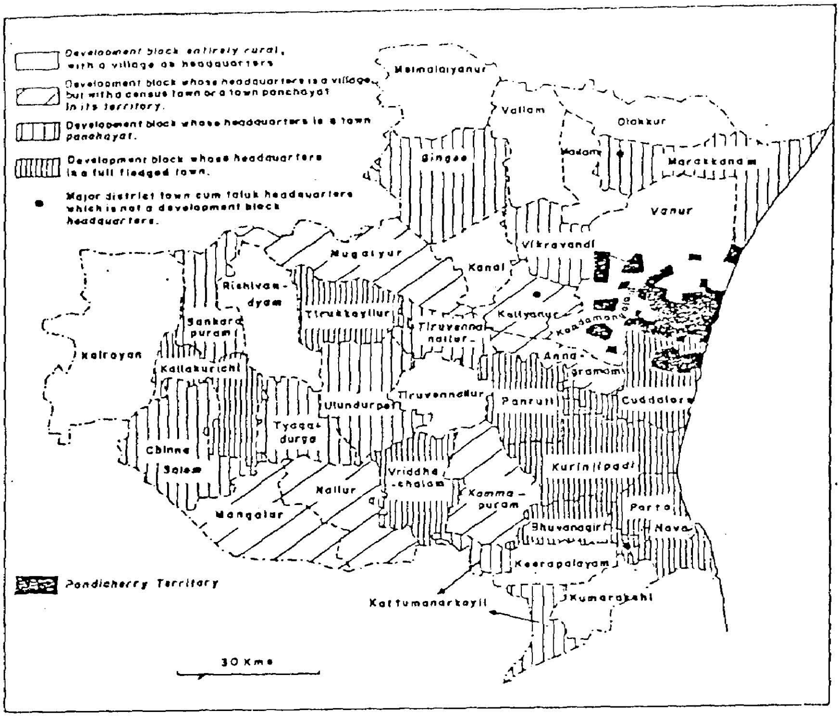
Fortunately, we have an adequate substitute for that, as, with only two exceptions, all the centres we classified "large boroughs", "boroughs" or "borough in embryo" with 1961 and 1971 as reference years, happen to be classified today as "town panchayats" by the Revenue Department, which thus labels any settlement of 5000 inhabitants or more[2]

---

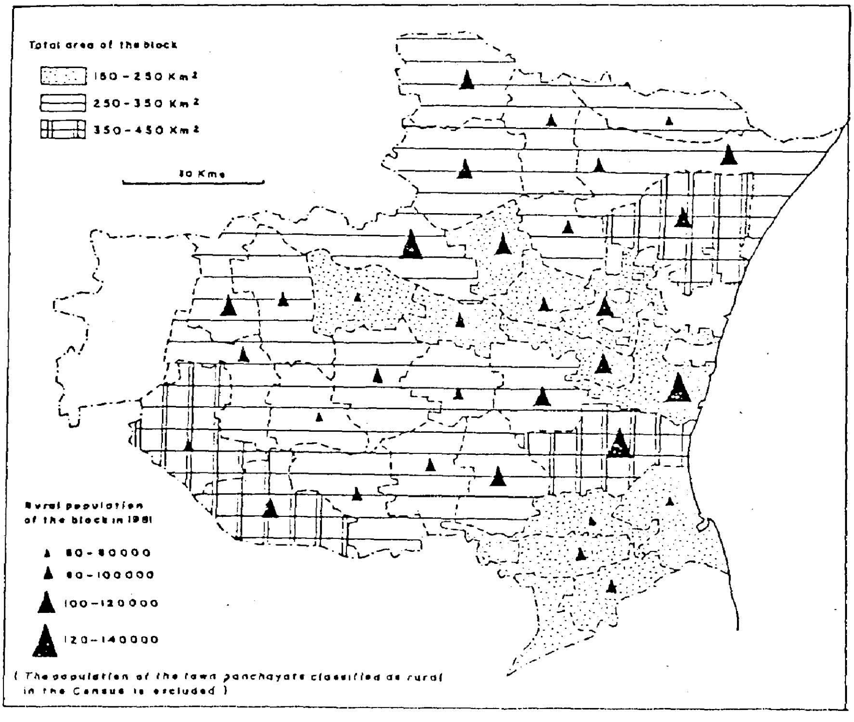
1. Id.p.23

2. But Arakandanallur, a functional suburb of Tirukkoyilur, is classified as a town panchayat with only 4338 inhabitants in 1981. Other town panchayats not classified as Census Towns had in 1981 a population ranging between 5000 and 18000 inhabitants.

Map.1. The urban and semi-urban network in South Arcot



Map. 2 The Development Blocks in South Arcot



Map. 3. The disparities in area and population between the blocks.

having an annual income of at least one lakh rupees. Without theorizing here on the exact nature of urbanization, we shall, for the sake of convenience, use the concept of "Semi-urban" when referring to those town panchayats identified in addition to the acknowledged Census towns (Census towns which are not municipalities or notified townships are also classified as town panchayats).

Map 1 gives a picture of this urban and semi-urban grid, and shows, as background, the moderate extent of urbanization in South Arcot, as per the Census classification.

From map 1 is inferred map 2 which is very instrumental in assessing urban-rural relationships as far as the rural development state machinery is concerned. Actually, out of the 34 Block Development headquarters existing on 1.1.1985, not less than 16 were "semi-urban" town panchayats, 8 were frankly urban, 10 were rural. The semi-urban class, conjured away by the Census, appears therefore as a class whose importance is paramount in the implementation of rural development policies.

Having built up a map of the urban (and semi-urban) grid, we may turn our attention now from localities to areas, in order to analyse the manner in which the state has criss-crossed the countryside toward the implementation of rural development, and answer three questions: what role do towns perform in the process? How far the rural development bureaucracy goes rural? What lessons can be drawn from the spatial pattern set up by the administration? Significant in this perspective, will be the size-approach: if we compare the rural development grid with a fishing net, then what type of meshes have the urban policy makers selected for implementing a programme bound to concern all villages? The analysis of the territorial mesh-making process, if we may risk using

this formula, is bound to throw some light on three correlated perspective: the geography of state power, the development endeavour, and urban-rural relationships.

C. From town to village: the Rural Development network in South Arcot

Chart 1 provides a first perspective on the hierarchical set-up of the rural development machinery, from town to village, as it was in 1984. Let us concentrate first on the left side of the chart, devoted to the rural development grid, In pursuit of what is now our objective, we may briefly take note of the grid pattern at the urban upper levels, and pay more attention to the lower levels, which deal with the direct implementation of the rural development policy.

The upper levels include three tiers, all of which have urban headquarters, all control the implementation process, define it, budget it according to the general policy designed in Delhi and Madras and to the funds received from Delhi and Madras. Those three tiers are:

- the District, with the Collector and his team of district level officers, including two Personal Assistants, Panchayat Development, and the Project Officer, District Rural Development Agency all of them based at the Collectorate at Cuddalore.

- two "Development Districts", North and South, which were planning areas when the district level planning approach was in vogue. The two P.As, Panchayat Development, are in charge of the Divisions included in these Development Districts.

- five Development Divisions, each one headed by a Divisional Development Officer, based at Tindivanam, Tirukkoyilur, Vridhachalam, Chidambaram, Cuddalore (all Census towns).

DISTRICT COLLECTOR

PANCHAYAT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION	Urban/rural Character	REVENUE ADMINISTRATION
District level Officers, including two P.A.s, Panchayat Development in charge of 2 Development Districts and one Project Officer, District Rural Development Agency	District Headquarters (pop. 127000)	District level Officers including one P.A. General and Revenue
5 Development Divisions (5 Development Division Officers:DDOs) Tindivanam 7 blocks Tirukkoyilur 9 blocks Vriddhachalam 9 blocks Chidambaram 5 blocks Cuddalore 4 blocks	Census towns	5 Revenue Divisions (5 Revenue Division Officers Tindivanam 3 taluks Tirukkoyilur 3 taluks Vriddhachalam 3 taluks Chidambaram 3 taluks Cuddalore 2 taluks
		13 Taluks (tahsildars) 8 urban headquarters 4 semi-urban headquarters 1 rural headquarter
34 Development Blocks (34 Block Development Officers:BDOs) 8 urban headquarters 16 semi-urban headquarters 10 rural headquarters	transition from urban to rural	82 Firkas (82 Revenue Inspectors) 11 urban headquarters 19 semi-urban headquarters 52 rural headquarters
340 Rural Welfare Officers Intervention Areas Each RWO is in charge of a few villages (4 to 6)	rural	
1768 Panchayat villages		2333 Revenue villages One Village Administrative Officer for one, and sometimes two or three villages.

Chart. 1. The rural development administration and the revenue administration : a comparison between their spatial networks in South Arcot District.

Next comes the key administrative unit of the rural development machinery: the Development Block.

Up to January 1985, the first feature of the Development Blocks network was, in a sense, the gap it left in the Kalrayan Hills. A short lived attempt to set up a Tribal Development Block on the mountain ended in 1961, as the gram sevaks posted there, hailing from the lowlands, set up their bases in the towns surrounding the hills instead of setting permanently in the Kalrayans. Before 1976, date of the final abolition by the Tamil Government of the traditional rights of the jagirdar families controlling the South Arcot part of the Kalrayans, the land was not even surveyed and the population, strangely enough, not even classified as scheduled tribes. A major geographical divide was thus intensified by the administrative-cum-development machinery, as if for urban planners and bureaucrats a mountain lacking roads, market places and hill stations was really too rural an area to be worthy of a developmental endeavour.

Things are now changing however. Roads and welfare infrastructures are now penetrating the Kalrayans, which become in February 1985, a full fledged Development Block. Its specificity will naturally remain, and deserves a separate study as such, but at least the entire district is now encompassed in the rural development grid.

The Kalrayans case brought to light we may now turn to the remaining 34 "standard" blocks. Map 3 provides a view of their grid. Established in 1960-61, it has undergone no significant change since.

How far the rural development bureaucracy goes rural?

We have mentioned earlier that, out of 34 Block headquarters only eight are frankly urban. Five of them, are also in fact taluk headquarters, three are Development

Division headquarters, and one is district headquarters. It would be wrong however, to conclude too hastily that towns are always taking the best, as far as the rural development grid is concerned. Interestingly, several taluk towns are not block headquarters: let us mention Tindivanam, Chidambaram, and even Villupuram, the third town in the district, which is not even headquarters of a Development Division. (Neyveli, the second biggest town, does bring about change in its immediate hinterland, but, as a township, is outside of the traditional rural development network). This is certainly a noticeable feature: as per the urban hierarchy, Villupuram municipality (pop.77000), or, as second choice Valavanur town panchayat (pop.13000) ought to be block headquarters, but the function was assigned to Koliyanur village (pop.4500). The same pattern may be observed in the adjacent Annagramam Block, where Nellikuppam (pop.40000) is not the headquarters. More generally, in more than fifty per cent of the cases, the block headquarters is not the biggest settlement in the area under consideration. In eight cases the headquarters is a village, while the block boundaries encompass a Census town or a town panchayat, and in five cases, in purely rural blocks, the headquarters is not the biggest village, but rather a village better located on a main road, such as Vallam, Mugaiyur, Tiruvanalur. All of us know these settlements and their contrasted morphology: the old village, usually slightly away from the road, and by the roadside the series of yellow painted stereotyped buildings in which are located the Development Block Offices and, ultimately a primary health centre, a veterinary centre, a land development bank... This is the way in which, for the most part, the rural development bureaucracy goes rural and all the more so, since a few town panchayats which are block headquarters physically still preserve their rural atmosphere. Their tertiary sector - services as well as trade - has grown a great deal but these "boroughs" such as Sankarapuram, Vikravandi, Tiruvennainallur owe their relative dynamism and prosperity to the rural hinterland they interact with.

There is however a second criterion by which the rural involvement of the rural development machinery may be assessed: it is the staff in charge, its duties and its background.

Such an assessment is not easily conducted; to be really significant extensive interviews would be required. Nethertheless an enquiry conducted in a single block - Kallakurichi - may provide some pieces of information. It will be noticed that out of 51 government servants working under the Block Development Officer, only 10 Rural Welfare Officers (ex-grama sevaks, ex-village level workers) live and work constantly in the villages, while the tend Extension Officers and the eight technicians, even if based in town, are obliged to visit all the villages of their block once in three months. The Block Managers and naturally the clerks and the subordinate staff don't on the other hand, work in the field. In the case selected, as the headquarters, Kallakurichi, was a Census town, 41 out of 51 staff members were urban based. The figure would naturally differ for purely rural blocks even though, when the headquarters is too small a village, officers may live in the nearest town. But on the whole, the most important point is not so much the base for work as the personal background of the civil servant, and his direct or indirect acquaintance with village life. Here, the staff is divided into two clear categories, those who have a rural background, and the rest. The first category includes the Rural Welfare Officers, who all come from villages. They may have spent a few years in an urban or semi-urban High School in order to pass their SSLC, plus a couple of years in one of the four training centres established in Tamilnadu for Village Level Workers, but they have definitely kept their rural roots. A noticeable feature is that Rural Welfare Officers may by promotion become Extension Officers based at the Block headquarters; this process ensures that at least a part of the officers implementing the rural development policy

have a strong rural background. But the pace of promotion is not so fast as to enable those starting at grass roots level to become Block Development Officers.

Thus, most, if not all, the B.D.Os, and many of the managers have an urban background, and for those who have spent decades in Cuddalore or in the large district towns, it is not so easy to settle in a minor town panchayat, much less in a village. If the children are in the best rated high schools or in the few colleges established in only a handful of district towns, the officer will want to leave his family in town, and to commute twice a week to and from his semi-urban or village office. Even if devoted to rural development, he will strongly preserve his urban roots, habits and tastes: it is probably at the key level of the Block Development Officers - men of power and authority in their area-that the whole ambiguity of the urban conceived rural policies is most experienced, if not most publicized.

The dynamics of change rural development policies aim at, are not of course just the result of officers moods. All B.D.Os, while implementing state orders, have to deal with four fundamental features.

- the nature of the area they have to develop;
- the additional forces of change at work in their blocks;
- the nature of the development policies themselves,
- and the socio-political feedback emanating from the villages, and canalized through various channels to the urban centres of decision.

The first and second of these four points are still related to the spatial network we are trying to analyse here. The last two points, though certainly not divorced from spatial dimensions, will however be commented upon separately.

The Development Blocks grid: some striking disparities

A brief examination of the area and rural population patterns of the 35 blocks currently existing (see map 3) brings two points to our attention. Even if we put aside the Kalrayans block (the largest, but the least populated), the disparities between the block areas are wide. In other words, the meshes of the net are very unequal. Areas range from 164 km^2 (Annagramam) to 450 km^2 (Mangalur). The twelve smallest blocks are (in the class 150-250 km^2) all in the rich alluvial plains along the Ponnaiyar and the Coleroon Lower Vellar system. The largest blocks (in the class 350-450 km^2) are on the whole poorer than the average, and include either tracks of the ferralitic coastal plateaux, or the South Western border areas. Between the two, most of the blocks, 18, are in fact spread over the granitic pediment.

Secondly, the disparities in the rural population charges, even if not as large, are nethertheless very noticeable. The least populated block after the Kalrayans (taking into account the rural population only, as this population is the target of the rural development endeavour) was Bhuvanagiri, 66,674 villagers in 1981. With 134,793 villagers Cuddalore, the most populated block, had twice the inhabitants of Bhuvanagiri Block. Moreover, there is no correlation between area and population: the most populated blocks are of very different sizes and, generally speaking, the high population of a block is not necessarily compensated, as far as the development staff duties are concerned, by a small area. As all blocks have the same staff (except when a special project runs in selected blocks where an additional officer might be posted), the norm is that large size blocks and highly populated blocks are handicapped. Even if the pattern of allotment of funds may alleviate these disparities (and the study of the allotment pattern at division level suggests that per capital

equalisation is far from being the rule[1] it is an evidence that the Block Development Officer and his staff, including the ten Rural Welfare Officers posted in each block, cannot devote equal time to each village and each family when they have 42 villages to cover (Panruti Block) or 66 Villages (Vallam Block); when they have to raise above the poverty line 40,000 Harijans (Kurinjipadi Block) or 17,000 Harijans (Melmalaiyanur).

Here is a major flaw in urban generated strategies which were apparently satisfied with the fact that each block was in the hands of a standard sized staff, and did not pay enough attention to the micro regional disparities.

Another flaw affects all the blocks, including those which are relatively the best supervised: they are two large and this sized defect reveals a great deal of the general philospphy of the state, and its limited development endeavour.

<u>Is rural development an easier process than revenue collection?</u>

We stressed earlier that revenue collection was one of the two fundamental tasks assigned to the colonial administration. More than thirty years after Independence the revenue collection grid established by the British authorities is still the leading pattern of space subdivision; when we think of any place in a district we can locate it precisely through the taluk grid. More than thirty years after Independence the leading district officer is still called the Collector, as if the main task of the administration was still officially

----

1. To choose an example on the maintenance front: allotment in 1984-85, under the maintenance grant for maternity centres: Vriddhachalam Division: Rs.41 per annum per hundred villagers, Chidambaram Division: Rs.87 (Source: calculated from "<u>Details of allotment for 1984-85, expenditure and balance under various schemes as on 14.3.85</u>" Unpublished. Collectorate of Cuddalore.

acknowledged as being the transfer of the taxes to the Madras Treasury.

When trying to assess the rationale of the urban-conceived rural development grid, we cannot but compare it to the most elaborate of all network, i.e. the Revenue system of territorial coverage and control. This yields significant results. Let us have a fresh look at chart I so as to compare the rural development set-up and the revenue set-up. At the urban upper level under the Collector's control the five divisions are similar. Discrepancies appear at the medium and at the grass root levels. At the medium level, the Revenue Department has a two tier grid, the taluks whose headquarters are the focal points of the life of the countryside as far as most of the trade activities, welfare amenities and official facilities are concerned, and the firkas tier constituted on much smaller areas than the block. At the medium level, the rural development machinery has only one grid, the Development Block network. In 1971, as in 1961, there were, in South Arcot, 8 taluks, 55 firkas, and 34 Development Blocks. Today, we have 13 taluks, 82 firkas and still 34 Blocks, plus the new Kalrayans unit. Clearly enough, the Revenue Administration, although enjoying the better territorial coverage system, still make it tighten and multiplies the meshes of its net: the promise of a better catch. On the other side, not a single block has been divided: the rural development grid sticks to its large meshes.

The contrast between the two grids is still stronger at the grass-roots level. On one hand, the Revenue Administration identified 2333 revenue villages, and posts frequently one Village Administrative Officer to one single village. When villages are small, the V.A.O. may be in charge of two or three revenue units. On the other hand, the Development Block Machinery identified only 1768 panchayat villages (a few hundred of them including two or three revenue villages), and posts only one Rural Welfare Officer for, an average, five or six panchayat villages.

The rationale behind such a discrepancy is to be found in the following alternative: as the power to control the rural space through territorial grids is in the hands of those who, in Madras, control the state, either this state power believes that rural development is an easier process than revenue collection - and thus requires less men on duty on the spot - or this power believes that rural development does not deserve more men and a more efficient grid, snatching at least that of the revenue set up. Nobody, I suppose, would believe in the first assertion and it is likely that the second better reflects the thinking in high places in Madras. Whatever may be the content of the official speeches and the financial allocations granted to the blocks, if there is any urban bias against rural development it is to be found here.

An overall partition of existing blocks would seem to be strongly indicated. Taluks have been divided. Firkas have been divided. The district itself will be divided according to an announcement in early April from a senior minister from South Arcot. In such a context, it would be unjustified to deprive the rural development endeavour of a better adjusted grid, with more extension officers and village officers.

The dynamics of rural change itself provide us with preliminary indications as to how the blocks could be efficiently divided. Let us examine these indications.

D. <u>How urban functions go rural; marketing, finance, and the dynamics of rural change.</u>

Be it expressed by the dynamics of economic growth sustained by expanding production and intensified trade, or aimed at more intricate development dynamics, through a (moderate) redistribution of assets and incentives to the weaker rural sections, the rural change as it manifests itself in Tamilnadu to day is not, and cannot be, the result

of the combined action of the Rural Development Agencies and the Agriculture Department alone. Social movement, trade and finance are very much at the core of process of change as well. Trade and finance were never exclusively urban. Sandais, were villagers gather once a week, have always existed and still do, and the same is true of village money lenders. But the money lenders are normally approached for emergency succour and family special expenses rather than for productive purpose, and except perhaps for a new cattle fairs of repute, sandais usually cater for the regular needs of the surrounding villages, and do not market agricultural production as such.

Hence, despite sandais and village money lenders, towns are traditionally the central places where traders in agricultural commodities are based, where financial institutions are located, be they nationalized or private banks, credit cooperative societies or registered chit funds companies.

A significant development of the last decades, as far as urban-rural relationships are concerned happened previously in those fields of agricultural trade and finance. Without examining the topic in detail[1] we may mention two instruments used by the state for accelerating the dynamics of change in rural areas. One is the grid of the regulated markets, the other is the network of bank branches.

The efficiency of the regulated market as a tool benefiting producers, and particularly small producers, has been strongly denied by B.Harris.[2] But whom so ever the final

---

1. For a detailed assessment of trade based on field survey conducted in a district adjacent to South Arcot, see Barbara Harriss "Transitional Trade and Rural Development". Vikas, Delhi, 1981.

2. B.Harriss: State and Market State intervention in Agricultural Exchange in a Dry Region of Tamilnadu: South India, Concept, New Delhi, 1984. See chapter 4 "Regulated Agricultural Markets, p.71-116.

beneficiaries of the markets may be, it is relevant to note how they have multiplied recently (in contradiction to "the current emphasis on the necessity to centralize trade geographically" emphasized by Harriss). Traditionally, traders went or sent their agents to the villages to buy crops. The first regulated markets set up in "large" Census towns (Villupuram, Tindivanam, Vriddhachalam are currently still the big three) reversed the movement, and brought the farmers to the town, in search of a fair price for a standardized and controlled commodity by way of bidding and with immediate payment. Even if defective, even if in some cases traders may turn to illegal collusion in order to lower the bids, the system seems not to be so unattractive for the farmers, if the Kallakurichi Regulated Market may be considered as a significant example: the day we visited it, 703 growers were offering their produce (it was in March, with groundnut crops very prominent) to 55 traders (an average number), and, on the whole, official estimates suggest that 90% of the groundnut crop, 90% of the gingelly crop, and 60% of the paddy marketable surplus of the notified market area are auctioned through the local regulated market.[1]

The next phase was the opening of regulated markets in smaller localities. Many of them were, as per our criteria, identified as "boroughs" in our interpretation of the 1961 and 1971 Census data: Marakkanam, Tittagudi, Thyagadurga, Sankarapuram, Tiruvennainallur, Vikravandi. This strengthened their role as relay between full-fledged towns and common villages, all of them being headquarters of a Development Block as well.

Finally, regulated markets were opened in a few big villages such as Manalurpet (pop.6092), Anantapuram(pop.5300),

----

1. Interview with the Superintendent, Kallakurichi Regulated Market, 11.3.1985.

Avalurpet (pop.5947), Sethiathope (pop.5893). A basic function of the town, i.e., trading with agricultural commodities, is thus, even on a limited scale, going rural[1]. A map illustrating the network of the 27 regulated markets existing in early 85 would show that on the whole half of the villages are today, located at least 10 kms from a regulated market.

The same is true for another fundamental urban function: banking. The difficulties faced by central and State Governments in their attempt to convince commercial banks to tap rural resources are well known. Netherthelеss, the original reluctance has diminished. Most Bank branches are still urban, but a good number of them have opened recently in those small town panchayats we labelled as semi-urban, most of them being block headquarters. The movement actually goes far beyond the semi-urban (or semi-rural) network: branches are now open in villages which qualify as firka headquarters but which remain definitely small places such as Ariyalur (pop.2154) Nagalur (pop.2064), Kammapuram (pop.2929); and in villages with no other qualification such as Thembair (pop.2213), Thitanagiri (pop.2801), Salamedu (pop.1997).

Aside from and above village banks, banks in towns do drain rural funds and do extend loans to villagers. The leading bank of Kallakurichi is the State Bank of India: all transactions of the Block Development Office are managed by it, including the loans granted under the integrated Rural Development Programme, and the branch has on its staff one Rural Development Officer and one Field Officer. Many of

----

1. Occasionally for a time, as the concentration of decentralized activities tends to transform the nature of the receiving localities: Manalurpet, Anantapuram and Sethiatope have now received the status of town panchayats, as their annual income has passed the one-lakh line.

those who benefit from a bank loan also open an account deposit. For the bank manager it is clear that the growth rate of his branch, noticeable over the last five years, is largely due to the expansion of its rural activities, as most of its 3500 deposit accounts and 2000 loan accounts are those of villagers.[1] Data available at the district level confirm the growing penetration of rural areas by the urban banks, as table 1 shows: outstanding bank credit in South Arcot amounted in 1981 (for scheduled commercial banks) to 78.1 crores out of which agriculture, with 31.6 crores came a close second to industry, 35.1 crores.[2]

Clearly enough a good part of semi-urban funds are provided by the villages forming the bank hinterland. Still clearer is the fact that, while urban dwellers draw less loans than they deposit funds, patrons of the rural branches do the reverse and draw more advances than they lodge money in the bank. This does not mean that the extra loans are made good out of urban money since the semi-urban sector with its deep rural roots accounts in actual fact for a considerable deposit surplus despite being the larger drawer of loans. The semi-urban localities (that we have often identified as block development headquarters) may hence be seen as transit places for money coming in from rural deposits, and going out as rural loans.

If we consider the growth of the number of regulated markets and the expansion of rural and semi rural banking as some of the indices of the dynamics of change at work in the district, we may come up with some useful elements in the analysis of the spatial network set up by the rural development strategists and bureaucrats.

------

1. Interview with the Manager, State Bank of India, Kallakurichi Branch, 12.3.1985

2. Government of Tamilnadu Tamilnadu, An Economic Appraisal 1983-84, Madras, 1984, see p.131-132.

Table 1: Rural and Urban patterns of scheduled commercial banks in South Arcot in 1981

	number of branches	deposits (crores)	advances (crores)
total	166	73.2	54.3
urban	19	13.4	8.5
semi-urban	71	44.8	28.7
rural	76	15.0	17.5
share of the rural sector	45.7%	20.5%	32.2%
share of the combined semi-urban and rural sector	88.5%	81.7%	85.0%

Source: from Tamilnadu, An Economic Appraisal, 1983-84.

E. Towards a better rural development grid

While trade and finance percolate better and better from Census towns to semi-urban localities and to villages, while the revenue administration is well equipped at least spatially to control the countryside at village level, with the firka as a fairly satisfactory low range unit area, the rural development bureaucracy is not receiving from the state and its urban decision makers the remodeled network which could help it to carry out its duty.

A detailed examination of the various maps we have presented in this paper would suggest that the nodes of a more efficient grid do already exist. They are those localities-whatever their official status, be it village or town panchayats - which combine a set of facilities. Semi-rural and rural bank branches are frequently set up in firka headquarters. In a few cases, such as Avalurpet, Manalurpet and srimushnam, there is even a regulated market. An analysis

of the health and education amenities which has not been attempted here, would provide additional crucial information on the spatial dynamics of change: a good number of the localities recently enriched with an upgraded school and a primary health centre or a rural dispensary would be find on the list of the villages or small town panchayats graced with a bank. Those are the new grass roots centres of change, the interacting points between fully fledged towns and common villages, and it is around them that new blocks would most suitably be carved out of the existing ones. The firka, with its three dozen or 40 villages, could provide a model of what a better staffed development block could be.

Evidently urban policy makers are perfectly aware of what spatial pattern of coverage permit and what they do not: when the Noon Meals Programme was launched and developed, the government knew how to do it. Apart from the Revenue Department, another Department, Education, has a man in each village: the school master. In Madras, a Minister in charge of the Noon Meals Programme; in the district headquarters, a Personal Assistant to the Collector; in the block, a special Manager; in each village, the school master: this is certainly a coordinated and multi-level attempt to ensure that directives from Madras can be implemented in each village, for a programme which looks like a clever mingling of educational and nutritional strategies, with, as an additional attraction, no risk of social tension. And all political observers acknowledged, in the recent elections, that the noon meal programme was a fine feather in the cap of the popular Chief Minister, and a good vote catcher device as well.

Once again the question arises: why don't urban policy makers pay much attention to the defective network of rural development blocks, when they were so eager to build up a strong grid for revenue collection or for the noon meals

programme? Could it be that rural development policies pay less practical or political dividends?. This question brings us to the socio-political field which will now be looked at.

III. Spatial dynamics, social dynamics, and the limits of the urban-rural divide

We have deliberately left untouched, in the above spatial analysis, the effective social contents of the rural development programmes, the social framework in which they are implemented, and the social feedback received from the villages by the state power as well as by the urban based development bureaucracy. The limits of the present paper leave no room for a detailed analysis of these fundamental questions, but they certainly call for some attempt to consider them, at least within the scope of the urban-rural relationships.

A. From village to town: the feedback through elected bodies

Under normal condition the implementation of a rural development strategy is not simply an exercise of urban privilege and authority. Local government - the much publicized panchayat raj - is supposed to give villagers a voice in their own affairs whatever bias towards clientelism and social pressure there may be. As far as networks and areas are concerned, the key fact here is certainly the territorial identity between the development block and the panchayat union. This spatial identity is also hierarchically functional, as it enables the Block Development Officer to act as Panchayat Union Commissioner too. In the standard scheme, a regular feedback is thus provided at from the village: the members of the village panchayats may convey requests and proposals to the Rural Welfare Officer covering the area, while the village panchayats' chairman, at the Union Panchayat level are in constant interaction with the B.D.O. Further along the axis going from village to town, the panchayat unions chairmen sitting in the District Development Council are in regular touch with the Collector, who, ex officio, chairs the Council. (see Chart 2).

The point is that, in Tamilnadu, no regular feedback is authorized to flow upwards from the panchayat network, as the entire institution of elected village and Union panchayats has come to a standstill. The Government decision to reserve seats for women and scheduled castes and tribes in local bodies resulted in a Supreme Court stay. For years, no elections were held: villages and unions were simply administered by government officers. Mounting pressures for the reviving of the function of local bodies finally broke through, and elections to panchayats and panchayat union councils, announced at last by the Minister for Local Administration, will be held in September 1985.

We certainly do not take it for granted that the panchayat raj is <u>per se</u> a very efficient way for conveying the grievances and suggestions of the rural weaker sections to the policy makers. But the supersession of panchayats is not much more innocuous. Firstly, as far as urban-rural relations go in the development machinery, the power of the urban hierarchy is enlarged, as the Panchayat Union Commissioner who is none other than the B.D.O. has no elected counterpart at the Union level. At the end of the urban dominated development grid, the B.D.O. is thus both judge and judged. Rural feedback, the free comment on the result of the development policies is henceforth a self judgement, something of an urban-controlled mockery.

Let us go further, with reference to the recent Left Front rural strategies in West Bengal, where for years too, no local elections had been held; one of the first decisions taken by the Front after coming to power in 1977 was specifically to hold elections, and victory once achieved, to rely strongly upon local bodies, particularly <u>gram panchayats</u> and <u>panchayat samitis</u>, to break the traditional subservience linking the development and administrative bureaucracy to the powerful rural landed elite. For government devoted to

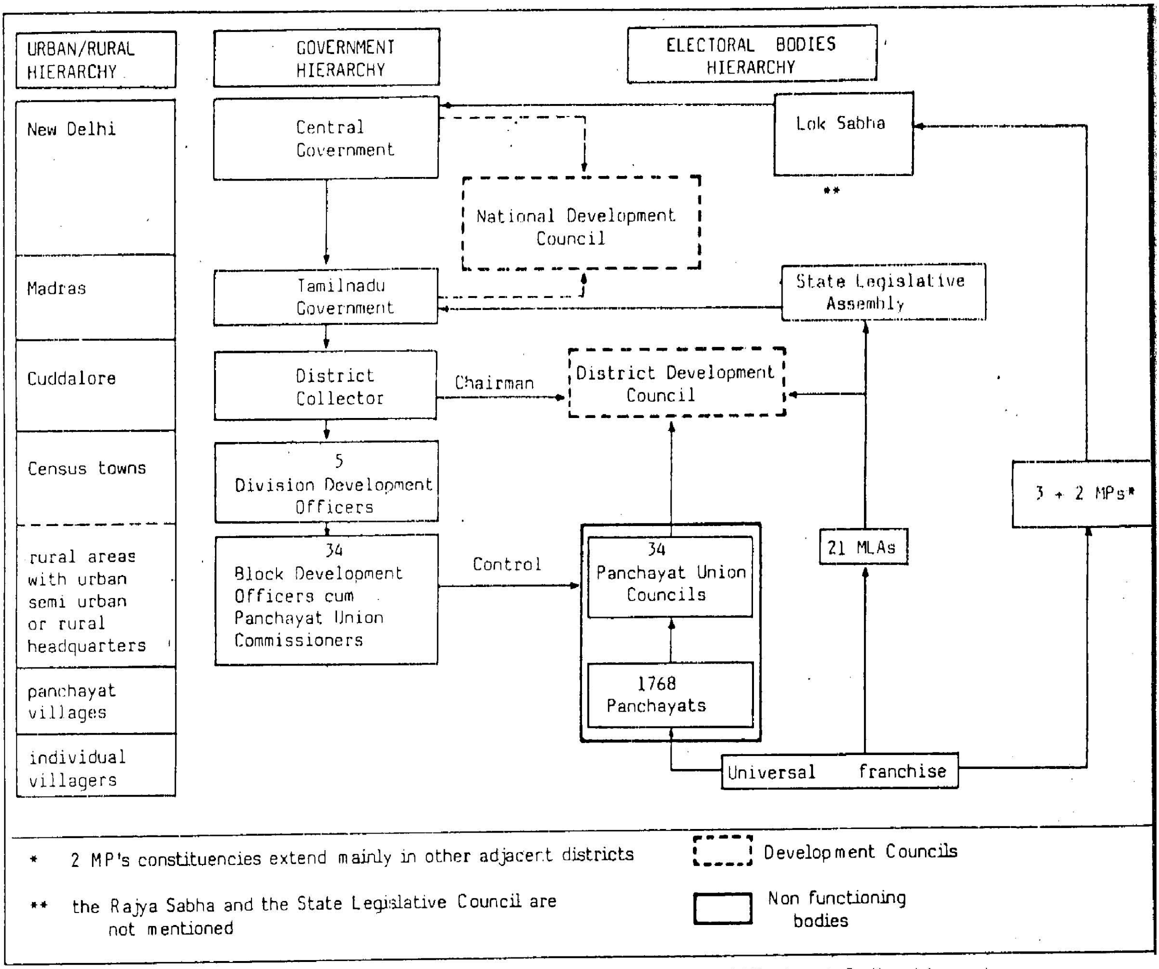


Chart 2. Urban/rural hierarchy, Development Bureaucracy hierarchy and Electoral Bodies hierarchy

reform the agrarian social relations, the political control of the local bodies - and the support at grass roots level of the party and of the Kisan Sabhas - was the way to bring significant change from Calcutta to the village. In the Tamil context, a contrario, the case with which over the years the government held itself apart from the panchayat system can only be interpreted as a sign of its reluctance to bring about radical change in the countryside. Not that the AIADMK is not eager to control the villages: its political opponents tend to analyse the suppression of the hereditary village headman and Karnam, and the intronisation of the Village Administrative Officer, as a clear cut strategy of political control. The question, in Tamilnad, in West Bengal, and everywhere else remains: control for which socio-economic purpose?

The temporary eclipse of the panchayat bodies has left open for the rural population, three ways to convey their grievance to town, i.e. to the administrative or/ and political powers. One is to spontaneously agitate for long due amenities. This is not a very common practice, but a few villages resorted to it recently, when they decided to boycott the elections in protest against the lack of response to repeated requests for a bus line, a bridge or a link road. A second line of action relies upon organised protest, and implies that lobbies or parties are at work. A recent example was given, in early April, when, with the backing of the Indian Farmers and Toilers Party, a procession of residents from Chengamedu village, Tittagudi taluk, went to the Development division office at Vriddhachalam, with symbolic empty pots in hand, and demanded "permanent relief in the matter of drinking water supply, repairs to roads from Chengamedu (...) proper functioning of overhead tank and opening of fair price shops in their village",[1] all matters normally dealt with by the panchayat representatives.

----

1. "Assurance saves villagers' pots". Indian Express, Madras, 10.4.1985

The third way open for rural feedback is much more ambiguous and much more permanent as well. It consists in the upper level elected bodies, and the representatives who sit in them: MLAs and MPs. The ambiguity here is manifold, firstly, because, even when a representative of a rural constituency (and all the South Arcot constituencies are predominantly rural), a party-affiliated MP or MLA has to receive a preliminary urban and centralized sanction simply in order to be nominated as a candidate. Thus, he is both the representative of a specific area, and the representative of a State or All India party, which implies that he has to accept the directives of the Delhi and Madras headquarters. Secondly, because of the nature of his representativeness, a MP or MLA represents an area, certainly, but which social segment settled in this area does he predominantly represent? For which groups, which classes, which interests will he act, interfere, lobby and bring pressure to bear?

Here we come to a well known area of investigation and debate, i.e. the relations between the local representatives and the development bureaucracy. Not unfrequently, those relations are summerised in one word by radical social scientists: collusion. In fact, it appears than such collusion, which is the rule more often than not, is largely the result of unequal power relationships. Studies of the bureaucracy (Kuldeep Mathur, V.A.Pai Panandiker) have underlined how different, and even anatagonistic, are the backgrounds of the leading IAS administrators and those of most of the MLAs. At the block level, the differences may be not so wide, but the uneven balance of power is more pronounced. First of all, an MLA represents a larger area than a block. Boundaries of constituencies and block-cum-panchayat unions are not necessarily adequate, but on the whole, a MLAs constituency encompass roughly two to three blocks. (South Arcot accounts for 21 MLAs versus 35 blocks), while a MP's constituency covers an average area approximately equivalent to ten blocks.

However, the power of the MLA is not to be found in the size of his constituency. It comes partly from the privileges and rights bestowed upon him. The MLAs, for instance, are ex-officio members of the District Development Council (as there is no Panchayat Union Chairmen now, the MLAs are all the better positioned to voice the grievances of their vote banks). Above all, the MLAs and the MPs are, in the case of the hierarchically subordinated development officers, men who have direct access to the urban centres of decision. Because of political affiliation, and besides their acknowledged role as representatives of the people, MLAs who have the ear of a ranking minister have to a certain extent the de facto power to transfer any one in the district, from the Rural Welfare Officer to the Collector himself. This relative instability in the administrative machinery, hopelessly subservient to the politicking game, shapes the actual background to the implementation of rural development policies. In most cases, collusion at local levels between the political strong man and the administration is unavoidable, be it spontaneous or not, and the changes in physical targets recommended by local representatives are just one common manifestation of it. This is also, we believe, one of the facets of urban-rural relationships as shown in the competitive spheres of political power and administrative power. The first takes the lead over the second for many obvious reasons, and also because the direct link between the rural constituency and the metropolis in command is much more efficient than the multilevel administrative and development networks which compel men, as well as ideas and reports, to follow the hierarchical set up of authorities in going from the base to the top: a set-up which largely echoes the pyramid of the semi-urban and urban hierarchy.

B. The limits of the urban-rural divide and the dynamics of change

The urban-rural dichotomy is an effective reality in many fields; physical amenities, welfare infrastructures,

rates of illiteracy, ways of life are noticeably different in the two spheres. In our openion, however, these disparities are not such as to allow the urban world and the rural world to be considered as two separate and antagonistic entities. They are, on the contrary, closely correlated. The concept of urban-rural divide is henceforth valid only when we assign some limits to it. Those limits result from, firstly, the constant economic, cultural, migratory, governmental relations established, directly or indirectly, between the countryside and the towns and cities, and, secondly, from the nature of the state power. The idea of an "urban bias" is very relevant on many grounds, but it tends, to blur a basic fact related to the nature of the state in India, and to the power and choices of the rural dominant class.

We tend towards an acceptance of this common proposal: that the state power in India, at the upper level, sustains the interests of the two dominant classes of the India Society, namely the enterprising and industrialist class and the class of the big farmers; whatever may be the repeated complaints against the Government policies made by these two groups (too many controls said industrialists before the 1985 budget; agricultural prices too low, say the farmers). To accept such a view (extremely schematized here) is to agree with a basic point: that the leading rural class is not as cut off from the towns, nor as much despised by the urban sphere as a too rigid acceptation of the urban bias concept would tend to suggest.

A look at the dominant rural class as it is in the Tamil countryside will confirm this idea. Look at the mirasdars of South Arcot : two or three families for a standard village of 1000 - 1500 inhabitants, usually Reddiars, Mudaliars or Vellalas by caste. No one knows exactly what they own, for besides their registered landed property, most of it nanjai, they may control benami lands too. These assets

give them power over tenants and over landless labourers families dependant upon them for their living, depending too upon the loans in cash or kind the landlord regularly extends to them. This wealth, and the deeply rooted socio-economic relations of clientelism, give the biggest landlords not only power, but status too. They are the benefactors of the local temple and the patrons of the village religious festivals. They are at the apex of the village social hierarchy. Because of this power over land and men, and because of their exalted status, landlords are usually not eager to leave the village. In a town, they would need much more wealth in order to enjoy an equivalent status, and their relationships with subordinate labourers would be of a very different kind.

It would however be unrealistic to belive that this rural power stands on its own. <u>It stands because the rural "elite" has the necessary connections with the urban sphere</u>.

The well-off farmers are those who know the men on the spot in the towns: the officers in the various Departments, those in charge of law and order and those who control the flux of finance, they know judges, police officers, advocates, bankers. Their surpluses are also for a part town oriented, not only for trade. Pretty often, they indulge in urban investments: they may buy property, set up a bus company, build a theatre, become partners, along with urban investors, in small or medium sized industries. A close relative may become an urban dweller and will then look after the urban interests of the family, sometimes on a full time basis, sometimes as an activity additional to the job he had chosen after passing a B.Com or a B.Law. Last but not least, the mirasdars have useful political connections more often than not. The most influential amongst them are seen as vote catchers by politicians, in a spirit of give and take. Multifarious therefore are the intricate relations between those who have the village as their main base of power and those who exercise power from the towns. Here, we do believe, lies one of the crucial

aspects of urban-rural relationships, and one of the key factors in rightly assessing the urban bias. If an urban bias drive the towns to grind down the countryside, the squeeze doesn't affect all the villagers, and works only because of the connections and the collusion between a section of the rural society and those who have some power in the towns, be it economical, political, or governmental in nature. Urban-rural disparities exist, but the urban-rural divide is not an overall reality. Beyond a certain point, the concept acts as a myth, masking - beyond secondary conflicting interests - a primary functional network of socio-economic powers which cuts across the urban and rural lines.

This picture, however, is somewhat fragmentary as social dynamics do not set it once and for all. One of the most interesting things to observe in India today is precisely the conciousness slowly transforming the social fabric of the village, a change strongly correlated with new urban-rural relationships. On the one hand, and we return here to the central topic of this paper, this transformation results from the rural development policy; on the other, it is the dividend of the spreading politicization of the rural masses. To summarize a complex evolution in a few lines, we may venture to distinguish three main phases in the general policies aimed at rural change in India. The fifties, and a good part of the sixties, were time of "Community Development" with emphasis given to the uplifting of the rural population as a whole. In the late sixties and in the seventies, the emphasis was shifted to agricultural growth and increased in production: the "green revolution" was supposed to benefit first the enterprising farmers, but also, ultimately the whole rural classes. Neither Community Development nor the "green revolution" succeeded in pushing the masses above the poverty line. Hence the approach selected for the eighties, with a twin emphasis on productivity on the one hand and alleviation of rural poverty on the other Phase II has resulted in an

increase in the weight of an expanded class of medium-sized dynamic farmers (to the cost of those who could not match them and lost their land). In Tamilnadu, this class, on the whole, was largely sympathetic to the Dravidian movement. Phase I of yesteryear did multiplies physical projects, but failed to eradicate poverty. Phase III today may very well meet the same fate. <u>Garibi hatao</u> might be a piece of rhetoric. But rhetoric is also a factor in change, and if the results of the development policies did not come up to official expectations, they did however promote some decisive changes in the mentality of the villagers, whose perceptions of the town, of the urban power and of the rural relays of the urban power are noticeably transformed.

The contraction of land and labour availability in the villages was bound to increase a migratory trend to towns and cities (in the 1971-81 decade, urban population growth rate in South Arcot was twice the rural rate). The movement is the result of many correlated factors, one of them undoubtly being the diffusion of education, and, at a minor but complementary level, the diffusion of the cinema in villages. Both opened some vistas on urban values and urban dreams. Both speeded up contact to politics whose highest centres of power are urban: the cinema, as a leading propagator of the Dravidian movement, ideology and rhetorics, and the education system, since the election of school leaders, even from the 10th standard, very quickly came to be decided according to political leanings. Thereafter, on the whole, the attitude of villagers with regard to the urban-controlled development administration underwent considerable change largely because, in one way, the urban centres of decision and power seemed to be less out of reach and alien than before, and sometimes less. Up to and including the fifties most villagers were rather subdued when facing the administration: for them submission to the goodwill of the bureaucrats was more or less of a rule. When the Community Development progfamme was really under way

in Tamilnad, in the sixties, information on policies and projects circulated from town to countryside and upliftment was presented as the official aim of the governments in power, in New Delhi as well as in Madras. "Upliftment"(Munnetra) was also the key word for a young and very active party, the Dravida Munnetra Kajagam, and DMK propaganda contributed largely to a fresh awakening of the backward classes, and the lower forward classes, which account for the majority of the rural population. This conjunction between national goals and regional politics brought a change: facing the development bureaucracy, these classes of small and low medium peasants, knowing that urban rhetoric was now on their side, abandoned their age old submission, and started to request bureaucrats to act for them, and not only for those with traditional power and connections. Finally, after the DMK and the AIADMK came to power, their populist stands masked somewhat the selective tendencies of the green revolution strategy. Politicization, more than ever, percolated everywhere, electoral promises and electoral compaigning aroused in many a feeling that after all, their voices counted, and that something was due to them, a reasoning further strengthened by the present emphasis on the weaker sections manifested in the Integrated Rural Development Programme. On the one hand, the movements having affected the Backward classes in the sixties gained momentum and spread over the Scheduled Castes, whose submissiveness diminished and whose demands were expressed in a stronger voice. On the other hand, and going a step further, the rural development bureaucrats were (and are now) faced with a new segment of villagers who not only ask to have things done, but also tend to order them, may to shrewdly threaten them. "I know my rights, who are you to delay action or to give me orders?" is not an uncommon comment in B.D.O.s' offices to day: when expressed by a villager wearing a red and blackedged somin, the supposition is that the man may have the exactly right connection with the urban political power. "I'll have a word about it with the MLA" the peasant might say. "I'll have a

word about it with the Minister" the MLA might say. It is important then to distinguish strongly the concept of "rural-urban gap", which refers to the widening disparities between the town and the village, as far as amenities and opportunities are concerned, from the concept of "rural-urban divide" which suggests that the two worlds are apart. In fact, the rural-urban gap - which itself deserves a thorough analysis - could very well result from a certain collusion between those in power in towns and the rural leaders enjoying both the benefit of their village, status and that of their urban connections.

Rural-urban relationships, state and society: a few (provisional) conclusions

A few (provisional) conclusions can be drawn from the here above analysis.

Firstly something of an ambiguity has to be clarified. On the one hand, the government machinery goes rural to a not negligible extent either directly, through the grid of the rural development administration, or indirectly, through its control of, for instance, regulated market and banking policies. On the other hand, the traditional ideology still holds good, that depicts the town as the authoritative centre of change, as the abode of education and knowledge, or even as the abode of civilization. The process of rural development is clearly expected to result from a descending pattern of hierarchized authorities, which is for the most part the copy of the urban hierarchy grid. To go rural is simply, in this perspective, to extend more efficiently the process of command from top to bottom. In the meantime, and secondly, this percolation of urban functions and powers to the countryside opens the way, along with current rhetoric on the eradication of rural poverty and the politicization of village life, for a new self assessment by the rural masses, who do not feel as alien from the town as before.

But, while rural people grow more and more acquainted with the town and its agents, the old prejudice (if not contempt) against villages and villagers still endures amongst urban dwellers and a good number of "rural developers". Those engaged in the battle for development with a theory of society and social change in mind how nefarious such an ideology can be. If these prejudices are not dispensed with one may wonder if the gap is not bound to expand between the urban men of decision, authority and action on one side and the rural weaker sections more and more conscious of their rights on the other. Politicians, in their own interests, know very well that the rural-urban divide is a fleeting and ambiguous reality with nothing simplistic about it: after all aren't they the very people who gain urban power through rural votes?

Thirdly, the increasing rural-urban mixture strategy departs positively from the past on at least one point: it testifies that the old disaggregated view of the urban sphere and the rural sphere is on the wane amongst policy makers. In contrast to the Sixth Plan philosophy (or lack of philosophy) of urban-rural relationships, the "Approach to the Seventh Plan"[1] recognizes, far more than before, the importance of urban-rural relationships with regard both to rural development and urban development. The Central Planning Commission now refers explicitely to "rural-urban disparities" (p.8) and to the "widening of the rural-urban gap" (p.13). The overall strategy currently rightly connects the future of the towns and the future of the rural tracks, hence the trend towards supporting a comprehensive effort in regional planning.

----

1. Planning Commission. The Approach to the Seventh Five Year Plan, 1985-90. Government of India, New Delhi, 1984. 32 p.

A fresh and more detailed plea for district and block plans is the logical result of this integrated approach. Locating infrastructure in "the numerous towns with population between one lakh and 5000" and "in several small rural centres which would have to be selected in a regional planning approach or where economic growth is already showing itself" besides slowing down the population exodus towards large cities and metropolises, would "indeed make life worth living in smaller places": such are some of the recommendations emphasized in the Planning Commission document (p.24).

Fourthly and finally, the two concepts of 'urban and rural' are evidently not the only parameters central to the challenge of rural development. The entire philosophy of the state and the nature of the political power presently in the saddle are crucial issues here, and what we have concluded from the analysis of the rural development grid, the looseness of a network whose meshes cannot match those of the Revenue Department, is just a clue amongst many others: that the Tamilnadu Government has no minister fully in charge of rural development[1] provides us with another indication.

We do agree with M.L.Dantwala, when he qualifies the Rural Development picture in three words: "Investment without Organisation"[2]. What can be added to his comment is that the lack of organisation also affects the spatial dimension of the development policy. Not that a finer grid would necessarily give a better result just as a finer plan is not automatically bound to fulfill the expectations. Whatever the grids and the plans are, the key questions remain: for whom do planning authorities plan? For whom does the implementation bureaucracy implement?

----

1. Besides the Minister for Housing and Local Administration, who deals also with Community Development, at least five other Ministers are concerned with matters related to socio-economic rural change.

2. M.L.Dantwala."Rural Development. Investment without organisation". Economic and Political Weekly, Bombay, 30 April 1983, p.686-689.

Just as a more comprehensive plan would do, a more elaborated grid would only sharpens an instrument: the grid is necessary, not sufficient. In one way, the urban-conceived network of the rural development machinery expresses only the level of dedication of a state policy not the ultimate aim of that policy. Getting up and controlling spatial network is not an innocuous exercise, for spatial dynamics are, for the most part, a significant manifestation of social and political dynamics: in the field of urban-rural relations as in any field to which a geographical approach may be taken, space, state and society are always fundamental categories, as well as intricately interwoven realities.